

Longer 2003/2004 season, increased bag limits, but delayed start in some areas

The California Fish and Game Commission has adopted a 99-day split waterfowl season for most of the state that again allows the use of spinning wing decoys during the second part of the season. The regulations also include youth-only hunting days for each zone.

The bag limit for ducks is seven per day, 14 in possession, which is an increase over last year for all zones except the Colorado River Zone. The bag can contain a maximum of two mallard hens, two redheads, one canvasback, one pintail and four scaup. The goose bag limit varies by zone, and is detailed below. For ducks and geese, the possession limit is double the daily bag.

The Commission had considered a motion to ban spinning wing decoys at its Aug. 28 meeting in Santa Rosa. After a lengthy debate the motion was defeated 3-2, leaving in place the existing regulation, which reads:

"Electronic or mechanically-operated calling or sound-reproducing devices are prohibited when attempting to take migratory game birds. It is unlawful to use electronic or mechanically-operated spinning blade devices or spinning wing decoys when attempting to take waterfowl between the start of waterfowl season and November 30. For the purposes of this regulation, wind-powered spinning blade devices and kites are not prohibited."

"Most duck populations were up over last year, and this year's wet spring is expected to result in better than average production of young ducks," said Dan Yparraguirre, the DFG's Waterfowl Program Coordinator. He also pointed out the shorter pintail

season length which is similar to last year's regulation. "Although pintail populations were up significantly over last year, they remain far below their goal. As a result, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service elected to depart from its Interim Harvest Strategy which would have allowed a full season with a daily bag limit of one bird."

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A summary of the 2003/2004 waterfowl hunting regulations can be found on page 10 of this issue of Tracks. Summaries are also available at DFG offices and license vendors statewide, and on the DFG home page.

While the late spring rains were a boon to waterfowl, they caused northern California rice crops to get off to a late start. Consequently, some state and federal areas in the Sacramento Valley will remain closed during the first two weeks of the waterfowl season to allow rice farmers to complete their crop harvest. According to Andrew Atkinson, a DFG Wildlife Habitat Supervisor, the delayed opening of the wildlife refuges is consistent with their original dual purpose of providing winter habitat while at the same time providing relief from depredation of agricultural crops. "Given the persistent spring rains, late

rice plantings and resulting delays in harvest, crop depredation is a significant concern this year. The rice industry, through the Sacramento Rice Advisory Committee (SRAC), requested that we delay the duck season on selected public hunting areas until after significant portions of the rice crop are harvested," said Atkinson.

The following areas will open to public hunting on Saturday, Nov. 1, 2003:

State Areas:

- Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area
- Gray Lodge Wildlife Area
- Upper Butte Basin Wildlife Area
 - Little Dry Creek Unit
 - Howard Slough Unit
 - Llano Seco Unit

Federal Areas:

- Colusa National Wildlife Refuge
- Sutter National Wildlife Refuge
- Delevan National Wildlife Refuge
- Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge

Still unknown is what impact the DFG's extreme budget constraints will have on waterfowl hunters at the state's wildlife areas. According to John Carlson, chief of the DFG's Wildlife Programs Branch, the challenge is to come up with ways to reduce operating costs without sacrificing hunter opportunity. "While there may be a reduction in some services we typically provide at the wildlife areas, we are doing everything we can to avoid actions that would reduce hunter opportunity, such as closing wildlife areas."

The DFG will announce any budget-related changes in service prior to the opening of waterfowl season via its Web site, located at <http://www.dfg.ca.gov>.